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### Jean Racine, Andromaque

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*Andromaque*, the third play written by Racine after *La Thébaine* (1664) and *Alexandre le Grand* (1665), marks both his consecration as a tragic playwright and his split with Molière, who had supported his early career. The first representation took place in November 1667 in the private chambers of Queen Marie-Thérèse and the reception from court was enthusiastic. The first public representation, two days later, by the troupe of the *Hotel de Bourgogne* (Les Grands Comédiens) officialises the split between Racine and Molière's troupe at the *Palais Royal*, who had performed his first two plays. The eponymous heroine was played by Mademoiselle Du Parc (Marquise-Thérèse de Gorla, 1633-1668). Originally a member of Molière's company, she had played the main female lead in *Alexandre* in 1665 but the *Palais Royal*'s success was soon eclipsed by a production of the same play by the *Hotel de Bourgogne*. It would seem that Racine, unhappy with the actors of the *Palais Royal*, had agreed to give the play to their competitors. This marked the beginning of the rift between Molière and Racine. Racine then convinced Melle Du Parc (who by then had become his mistress) to join the *Hotel de Bourgogne* since she was overshadowed by Madeleine Béjart and Catherine de Brie at the *Palais Royal* and therefore unlikely to get the best parts. He wrote the part of Andromaque specifically for her. The play was well received by the public, although the production was marked by the untimely death of renowned actor Monfleur, whose intense portrayal of Oreste was deemed to be responsible for the burst blood vessel which caused his demise.

The tragedy enjoyed much success in Racine's lifetime and remains, to this day, one of the most frequently produced of his plays (along with *Phèdre* and *Bérénice*).

When the play was put on the stage again in 1670, a newcomer, La Champmeslé (Marie Desmares) took the role of Hermione. She would soon become Racine's new muse and mistress and eventually the first leading lady of the *Comédie-Française* at its creation in 1680.

The actress Rachel (Élisabeth Rachel Félix) was also a memorable Hermione, taking the part in 1838 then again in 1849. The most famous *Andromaque* probably remains Sarah Bernhardt, whose performance in 1873 is rumoured to have totally eclipsed those of the actors on stage with her.

One of Louis Jouvet's early roles as an actor (under the name Jouvey) was in a production of *Andromaque* with le Théâtre d'Action d'Art in 1909. Jouvet later coined the wonderfully succinct summary of the play: "Oreste loves Hermione who loves Pyrrhus who loves Andromaque who loves Hector who is dead".

The first recorded 'mise en scène' of the play was by Charles Granval's in 1924. Pierre Dux offered his own version in 1964. Finally, Daniel Mesguich was chosen to direct the 1999 *Comédie-Française*'s production to celebrate the tercentenary of Racine's death.

There have been two operatic adaptations of the play: the libretto of Grétry's three-act opera *Andromaque* (1780) is based on Racine's version, as is Rossini's two-act opera *Ermione* (1819). The enduring popularity of the play is also demonstrated by Jacques Rivette's *L'Amour fou*, whose plot revolves around a rehearsal of the tragedy.

*Andromaque* is a tragedy in 5 acts, written in Alexandrine rhyming couplets.

Thematically all main characters, with the exception of Andromaque herself, are attempting to fulfil their personal desires despite the reluctance of their chosen love object and the fact that this desire is in direct conflict with their duty, represented by what their respective nations expect of them. Thus Pyrrhus should relinquish Astyanax to the Greeks to ensure that the victory over Troy is complete and the vanquished city cannot rise from its ashes. Oreste, as the Greek envoy, should convince Pyrrhus to do so and to honour his pledge to marry Hermione; Hermione's duty may at first appear to suit her desires but her references to 'gloire' and 'devoir' (to her father and to her country) are often contradicted by her continued presence in Epire, her outbursts against Pyrrhus' betrayal and virulent pleas for vengeance in the final act. In this, she is exemplary of Racine's characters' efforts to rationalise and justify actions which run counter

to their duties. A perfect example of this is presented by Pyrrhus, in Act IV scene 5, as he professes to be aware of Hermione's indifference towards him and goes on to accuse her, as Hélène's daughter, of being responsible for his current predicament. All three characters are typically conflicted, alternating between decisions that would serve their duty or their heart, although their decisions to abide by their duty are almost invariably a consequence of their conviction that their desires will not be fulfilled.

The story of *Andromaque* finds its roots in Homer's *Illiad*, although Racine specifically cites the version that appears in Virgil's *Aeneid* in his Préface. Despite its classical subject, *Andromaque* marks the emancipation of Racine as a playwright and presents a new kind of tragic protagonist, far from the noble and ultimately triumphant heroes found in Corneille or in the 'tragédies gallantes' which shaped the genre in previous decades. Racine's flawed, selfish and irrational characters herald what Paul Bénichou will call, in his *Morales du grand siècle*, 'la demolition du héros'. In his Préface, Racine berates those who would wish to see 'perfect heroes' on stage and calls on Horace and Aristotle to defend his characterisation, reminding his reader that the former advocated tragic heroes that were 'neither totally good, nor totally bad'.

While the plot is frequently summed up as a simple series of one-way love attachments, its complexity lies in its close examination of the characters inner turmoil and their attempts to rationalise their behaviour. George Forestier argues that it is the first truly 'Racinian' tragedy: one in which the tragic arises entirely from the destructive power of passionate love. Those elements highlight Racine's engagement with both contemporary philosophical issues (such as the conflict between passion and reason) and with the debate about formal and aesthetic aspects of drama, most notably the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. Racine's position in the debate, however, is somewhat ambiguous and it appears that many of his declarations of fidelity to the Ancients are intended to deflect attention from the truly innovative aspects of his work, for in truth, what Racine proposes is to a large extent a radically new conception of the tragic, one where, as Saint-Évremond observes, the characters are not there to serve the action but where the action exists to serve the characters. While Saint-Evremond, a staunch admirer of Corneille, deplores this approach, it defines, perhaps more than anything else, the originality of Racine's work.

This departure from the traditional model (exemplified by Corneille) and Racine's attempts to justify it are illustrated in the *Querelle d'Andromaque*. Despite its popular success (Perrault tells us that 'cette tragédie fit le même bruit à peu près que *Le Cid* lorsqu'il fut représenté'/'the play caused as much agitation as *Le Cid* did when it opened'), the play received some criticism, leading to the *Querelle*. Most of the arguments of the *Querelle* can be deduced from two main sources: *La Folle Querelle ou la critique d'Andromaque* by Subligny, premiered on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1668 at the *Palais Royal*, and Racine's first and second prefaces to his play. In *La Folle Querelle*, Subligny presents characters who debate the merits of *Andromaque*. Its supporters are presented as foolish and ridiculous while the sensible protagonists criticise it. Subligny's work most likely simply summarises the most common comments heard in literary circles after the play's performance. It is successful enough to be published a few months after its creation. Its Préface opens with Subligny's attempt to quell the suspicions that the play was actually written by Molière (perhaps in revenge for Racine's betrayal), and his insistence that his work is not an attack on Racine, who will in due course, he states, be a credit to his country but who has not yet reached the full extent of his craft. He then goes on, rather pedantically, to list some of the three hundred 'faults' he found with the language of the play.

Despite taking on board some of the criticism, as shown by the changes made to the text in the 1676 edition, Racine also responds, in his own Préfaces, to some of the accusations levelled at the play. A comparison between Subligny's and Racine's texts shows that some of those attacks were fairly contradictory: on the one hand, Subligny reiterates some of the criticism which points at flaws in characterisation, and in particular, the notion that Pyrrhus expresses himself likes a 'gallant' rather than a tragic character. On the other, Racine appears to defend Pyrrhus against accusations that the character goes against *bienséance* because of his aggressive persona and blackmailing, thus suggesting that Pyrrhus was deemed to be both too 'soft' and too 'harsh'. The decision to ignore the accusations of *galanterie* may also have been strategic on Racine's part: concentrating on the brutality of Pyrrhus enables him to reiterate once again his compliance to classical principles by citing Horace and to deflect attention from more subtle, yet ultimately more radical, departures from the classical model. Racine may also have felt some pressure to establish as a 'classicist' since, beyond the criticism of the formal and stylistic aspects of the play, there was a more general accusation that the play was not faithful to its sources, perhaps a reminder of Saint Evremond's statement, after *Alexandre*, that Racine lacked a true understanding of the Ancients ('le goût de l'antiquité'). Thus his justification (that Pyrrhus, as a Greek warrior, was naturally violent) also references Céladon, the hero of the précieux pastoral novel *L'Astrée* (1607) by Honoré d'Urfé, and appears to posit the importance of 'historical' *vraisemblance* over literary fashions ("Pyrrhus n'avait pas lu nos romans"/"Pyrrhus had not read our novels"), the position advocated by Horace. Yet Racine appears to bow to *bienséance* in other instances: he chooses to portray Astyanax (who, in most versions of the myth, is killed in Troy) rather than Molossus (a son Andromaque had with Pyrrhus), stating that: "Andromaque ne connaît point d'autre mari qu'Hector, ni d'autre fils qu'Astyanax. J'ai cru en cela me conformer à l'idée que nous avons maintenant de cette princesse."

It is true that while the play represents the aftermath of the Trojan War and draws on Seneca's, Euripides' and Virgil's versions of the myth, its sensibilities are distinctly French and even, as critics such as Lucien Goldmann have argued, specifically influenced by the Jansenist view on human wretchedness. Racine admits in his Préface that his tragedy differs quite widely from Euripides, stating that, apart from certain character traits attributed to Hermione, their subjects are 'quite different'. We may well deduce from this that Racine's subject then is not the 'representation of action and life' advocated by Aristotle, but indeed the representation of men. Perhaps surprisingly, given the changes he made to the plot, Racine cites in his preface the third book of Virgil's *Enéide*, in which Andromaque laments her fate: taken as a war prize by Pyrrhus, she has given him a son, but now Pyrrhus has given her to his friend Helenus and is pursuing Hermione, Orestes' wife. While the chain of attachments is significantly altered in Racine, the author insists that "there is much difference between changing a few details of a story and attacking its deeper meaning." His insistence that we must consider first and foremost the use authors have made of such amendments to "make the story suit their subject" gives us an indication of Racine's views on his craft: even as he defends the superiority of the Ancients and appears to stick closely to Aristotelian rules, his plays favour character development over the primacy of action. *Andromaque* in particular, as his first major success, establishes Racine as an author who is uniquely able to represent the complexities of human nature. As La Bruyère succinctly puts it: "[Corneille] portrays men as they should be, [Racine] portrays them as they are."

Among the flawed characters of the plays, Andromaque herself stands out. Unlike the other characters, she is not primarily defined by a desire for personal fulfilment but by the conflicting duties she faces as wife, mother and queen. Her dilemma lies in the irreconcilable nature of those distinct duties. Despite Racine's seeming deference to Aristotle, this is a clear departure

from the Aristotelian tragic model as it is difficult to identify in Andromaque the flaw or error (hamartia) which generally qualifies a tragic character. In this respect, the presence of Astyanax is significant. It renders Andromaque's motivations rather difficult to establish and may explain, beyond mere *bienséance*, Racine's decision to, as he puts it, "let him live a little longer than he did". Some critics have remarked that Andromaque seems far less motivated by maternal love than by her attachment to Hector: [...] c'est vraiment l'un des paradoxes du mythe racinien que toute une critique ait pu voir en elle la figure idéale d'une mère. Le dit-elle assez qu'Astyanax n'est pour elle que l'image (physique) d'Hector, que même son amour pour son fils lui a été expressément commandé par son mari. " (" it is one of the paradoxes of the Racinian myth that an entire school of critiques were able to see in her the ideal model of motherhood. She says all too often that Astyanax is only for her a physical reminder of Hector and that even her love for her son has been expressly ordered by her husband", Barthes). While it is true that Andromaque remarks frequently on the way he reminds her of her dead husband, she is also acutely aware of the fact that he represents the only hope for Troy's rebirth, something that she must take into consideration as Hector's wife and queen. With the future of Troy resting in the balance, Racine is able to magnify the destructive powers of passionate love, with Pyrrhus, Oreste and Hermione pursuing the object of their desire with scant consideration for the political impact of their actions. They do so, however, in full knowledge that their actions are in direct contradiction with their duties as king of Epirus for the first and ambassador and representative of the Greeks for the latter. They may disguise their true motivations behind notions of 'gloire' and 'devoir' but as Barthes points out "ce qui est cherché frénétiquement, c'est le bonheur, ce n'est pas la gloire, la réalité de la possession amoureuse, non sa sublimation." ("what is sought desperately is happiness, not glory, it is the reality of possessing the loved one, not the sublimation of this love.").

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